

richard wehrenwolf

Poems From Walls Elementary

accompanying zine to the album

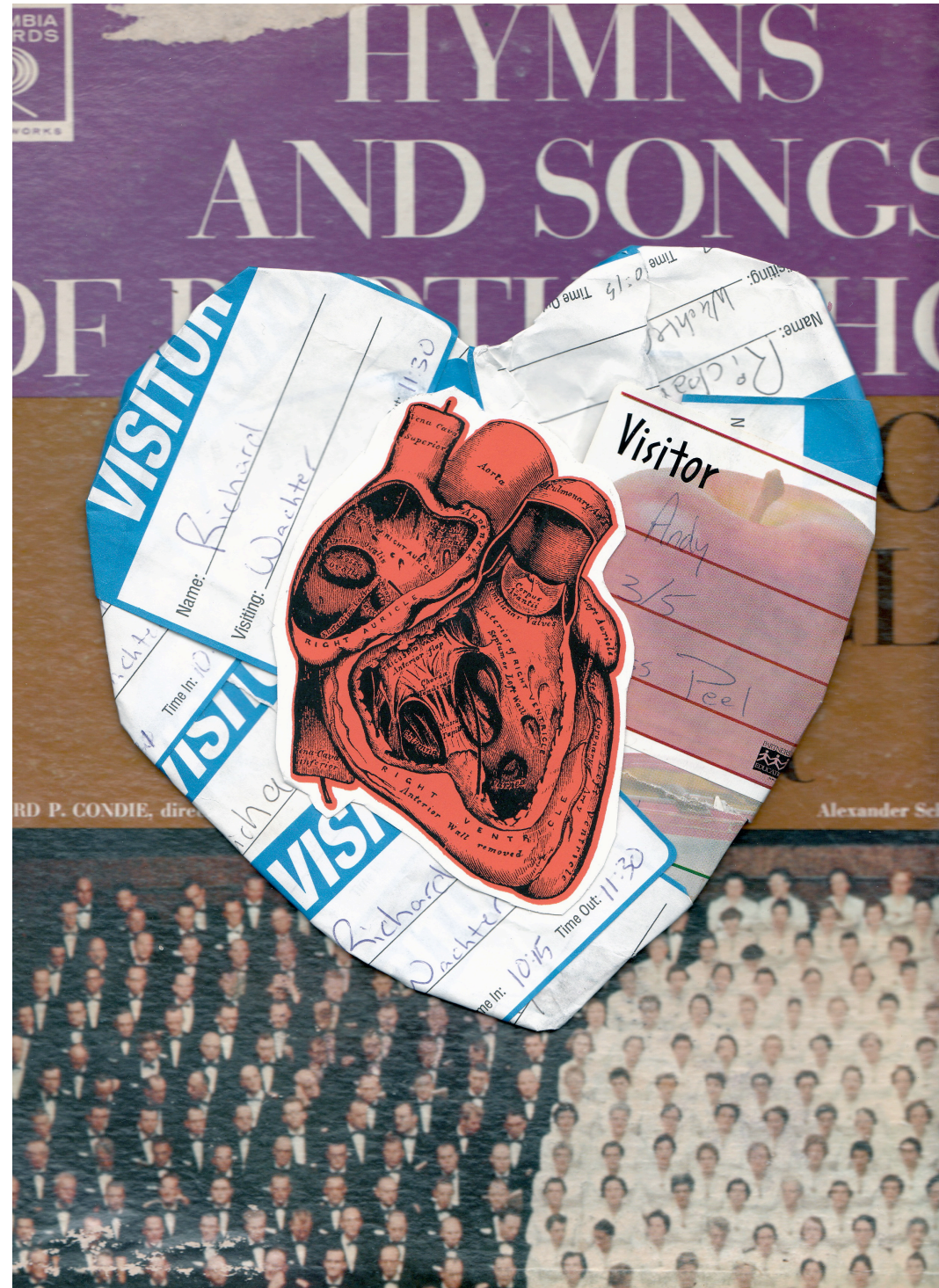
and other meanderings through childhood,
growth, teaching, learning, curiosity and ideology.

K

i d s



(hold onto someone else's fingertips)



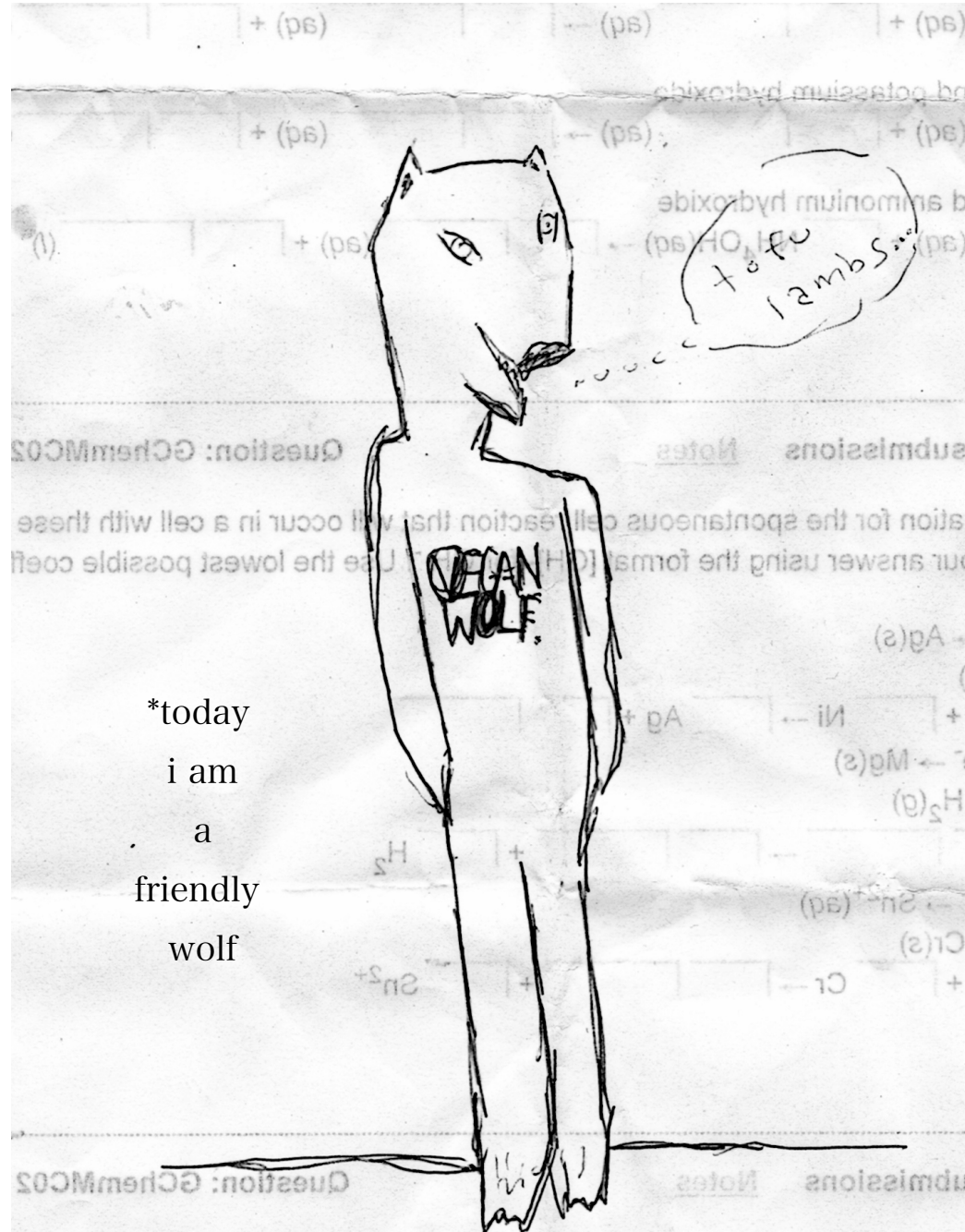
(and feel yourself in them)

+ learn(ing) to teach +

I never thought I would teach. I was the shy one. I do not speak loud enough. My thoughts stay hidden in their head-cage like dragonflies on the lake. On that first day at Walls Elementary, when hands shot up like bottle rockets and voices shot towards me, I felt them tugging something off of me. What they did, what they gave back to me was not what should be called a reward, but a process to which I am grateful to have taken part. The faces we dove into, the urges for some better word. Always. But still yes, the connection that these are not just words on paper, but our collective lives melting together, talking about death knights and zombies and hearts. And we did it for one hour a week, talking about how things were other things, how life was not life all the time, and everything else. Our hearts breathing, fingers like ants burrowing into paper, digging tunnels to each other. In this one classroom where I spent my time for nine weeks I learned a much greater gift too: how to teach outside of the classroom. It is a skill I think every one should try to develop, as we are all teachers of some sort. Trust.

-Richard

*we grow every single day // what we are right now is not what we will be or once were
(though this does not mean we cannot be these things) // there is a continual present
that allows growth (we hope) // we may see it fit as human beings to strive towards one's
self, to asses situations as they arrive // 'growing up' does not exist // what we are doing
then is growing out of old meanings and oppressions, finding ways back to former
wisdoms or building new paths, wherever they may lead // and if you are overwhelmed,
by all means, no one is pushing you // know this //*



what are we training for?

“but you must know the same games that we played in dirt, in dusty school yards has found a higher pitch and broader scale than we feared possible, and someone must be picked last, and one must bruise and one must fail.” -john k. samson/the weakerthans “sounds familiar”

that's what it feels like to me. unbridled competition. but is this 'unavoidable loser' doomed to alienation? i knew one day i would grow tired of this old myth. but how many of us have not? the time spent walking away laughing with 4-5 of my friends while one 'other' kid stood in the corner cowering under our weights. my hand was always in theirs, even if i had laughed. i know now i have always been with those kids. i have felt alienated and alienating.

i think of the classrooms where i spent my youth. chalk. yellow curtains. desks with tennis balls on the legs. tile. smelling soap and cardboard. these rooms where i learned the basic sign and meaning making systems of our particular time. i remember discipline and rewards. hierarchies. *good job richard, you get a gold star.*

i was as close to 'perfect' as i should be - seamless, restrained, quiet, special in my solitude. i tried to pay attention and learn and understand. one day my star hierarchy fell behind a bookcase and my teacher, ms. n, said, *oh, like it matters, richard never gets in trouble anyway.* and i smiled coily, unsure what facial expression to make. kids were making noises behind me, whispering maybe.

and i felt their stares, those kids who felt just as unsure of everything as me. those kids who would later grow to replicate similar tactics we ourselves were feeling. we were secretly growing apart from each other - but no - not by our own hands - but by structures that unconsciously influenced how we felt about each other.

it is easiest to imitate and further the oppression one has felt. what are we possibly handing down to the next generation? these games we learn in youth, this 'othering' of our losers. these attempts to create 'lessers' is certainly not necessary. why do we do it then? someone must be picked last, but does this mean he/she be sent to the underground, undesirable, meaningless? this implies i do not believe in the toughness of the human being. of course, i have overcome my 'training', but again how many have not? how much of conflict in this world originated in childhood? i tire thinking of every kid who has felt left out. how this has made some of us stronger, how this has made some give up all together.

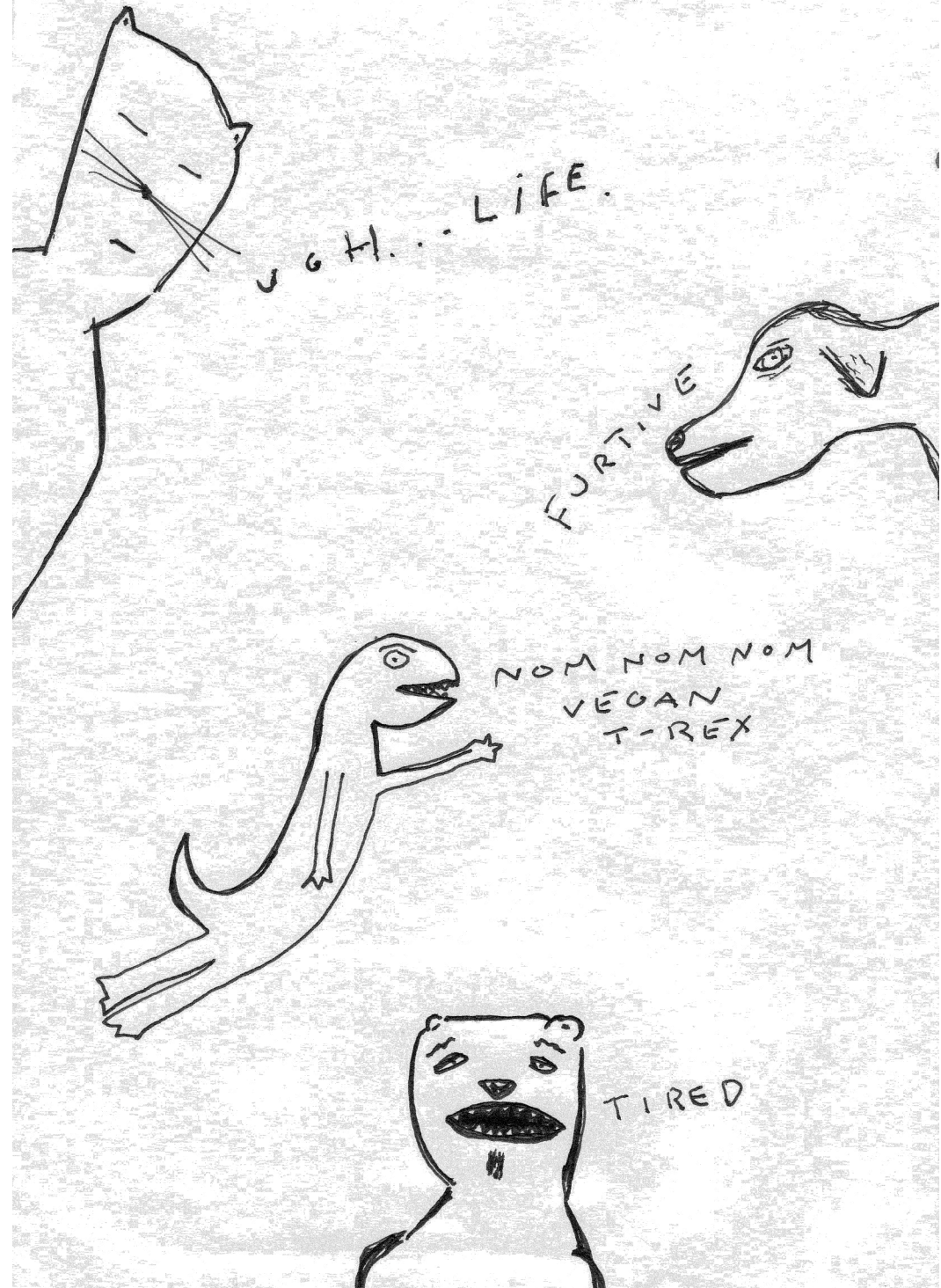
the beauty in bending to tie a shoe.

the openness in a face.

the wonder of our attractions.

we must not keep reproducing tired myths.

*tomorrow i may be this



the drawings that follow were created by another third grade class from Kenmare Boys National School in Co. Kerry, Ireland.

i told a story of a bear who lived on the cuyahoga river in ohio. the bear would often be found sitting next to his favorite oak tree. in the story, the bear, hoping to catch some fish from the river, jumps towards the river and just as he is about to fall in, the river freezes over and the fish swim away out of his reach.

these drawings were done after i told the story. each drawing is a unique representation set forth by the child's imagination working to articulate what the bear or scene looked like.

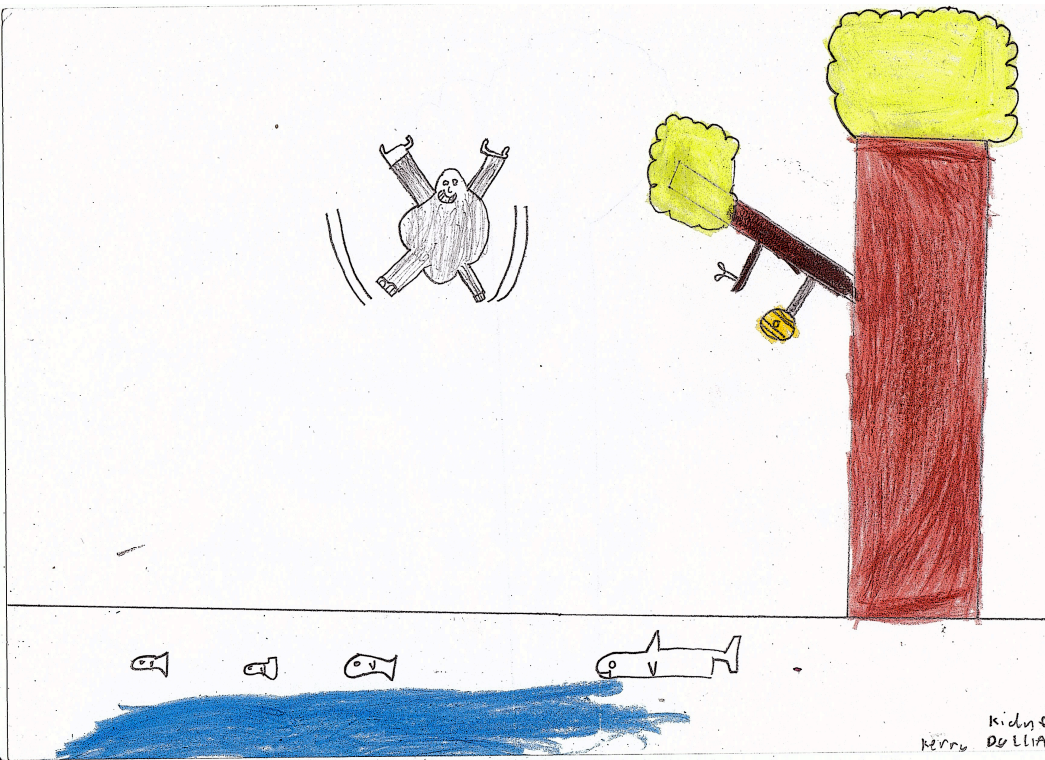
as a supplement to the poems of the third grade class from the city i live in, i offer these drawings for more inspiration from the beautiful things found in, and the wisdom of, youth.

the wonder in their eyes, the curiosity and offering of possibilities for where the story could go made me think of a question i try to ask myself sometimes :

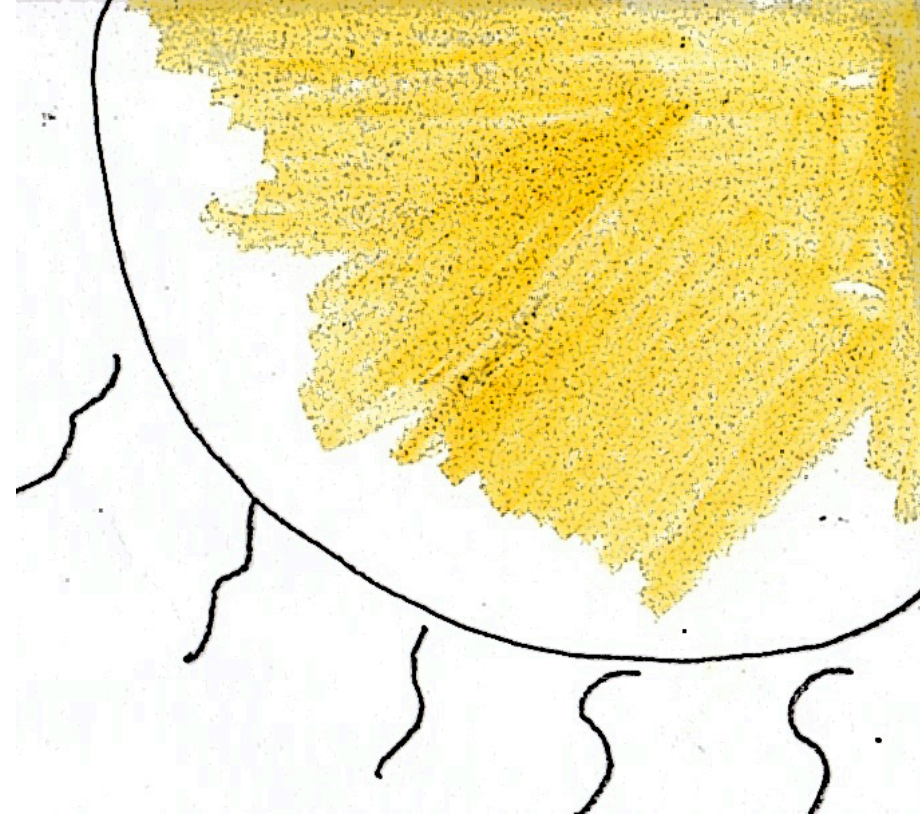
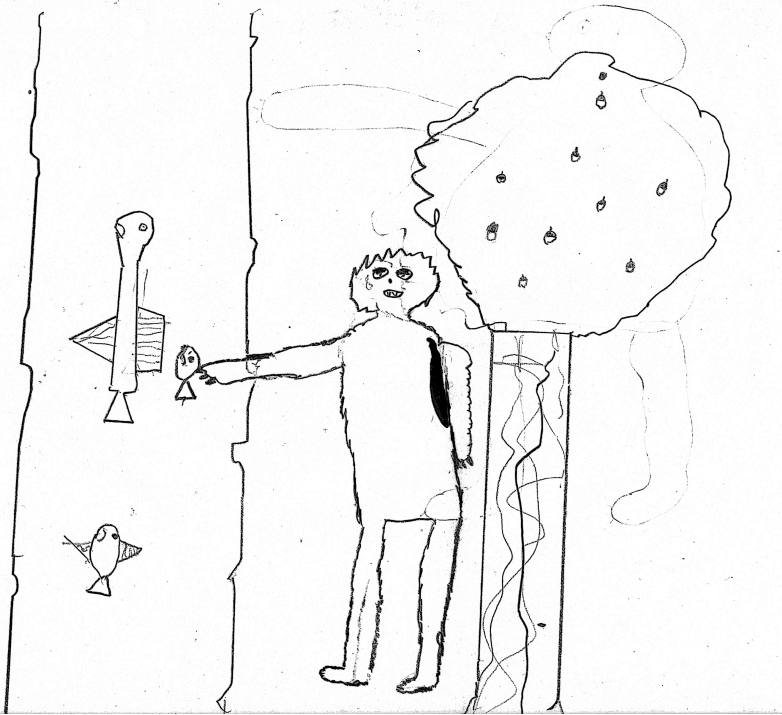
*is there really nothing here, is life bleak?
or did you give up too easily?*



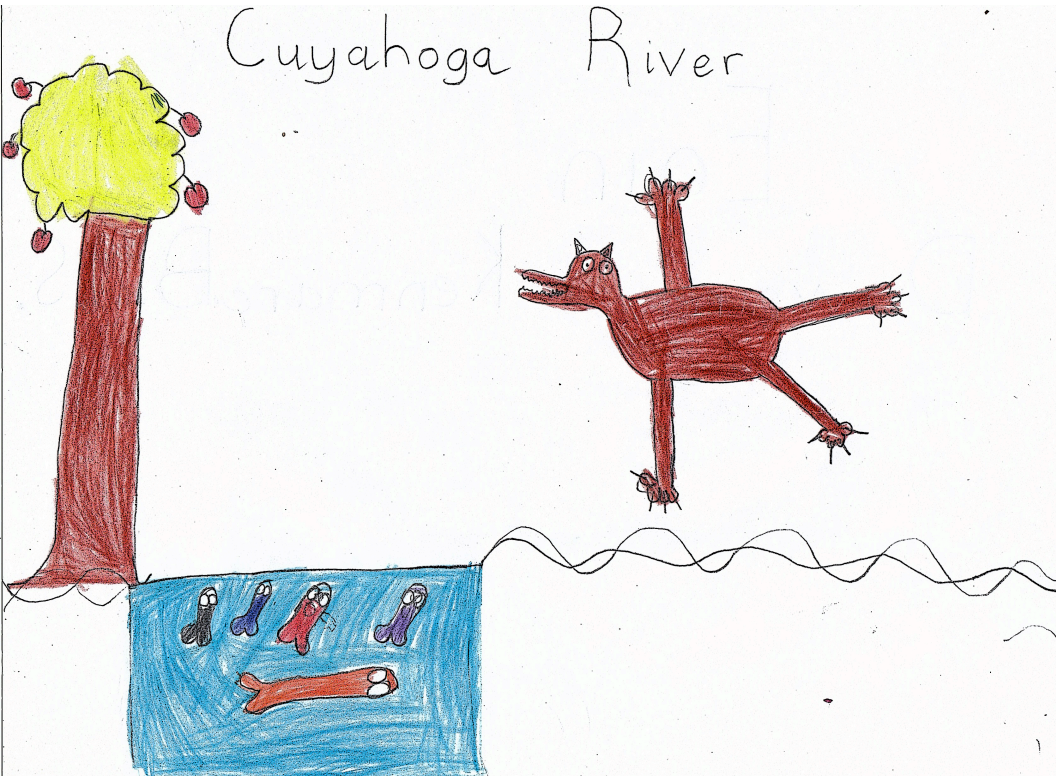
Matty
© Sullivan



Jack @sullivan
kenmare, co. s.



Alan Horgan Kenmare, CO. Kerry



Children were quite disturbing really. It was difficult to think about children for long. They were all fickle little nihilists and one was forever being forced to protect oneself from their murderousness.

- Joy Williams, *The Changeling*

oh just look at these poems. their fascination with death and loss. even with historical figures associated with destruction. this at seven years old. i remember being of a similar creed. aliens, bigfoot, thoughts of any kind, i allowed them to come to me. a certain kind of unyielding wonder filled me. maybe this is what people who (inevitably) grow up in the unrelenting onslaught of rationality and economics are disturbed by. i certainly was sometimes. i remember a boy in the class i taught as a visiting poet being told 'politely' that his topic of death in his poem is 'not appropriate for school'. he was talking about the murder of a person, and with quite descriptiveness i might add. i couldn't tell him to stop, even though i was terrified, in some way. but no, it was freeing. to see this. to know and let these thoughts exist, it is wonder, not anger, he is feeling. of course, there is need for discipline in any situation where harm takes physical form. but yes, i consider writing a safe zone. anything can be said, thought, written down. explore it. there is something beyond only murderousness, surely. wonder goes both ways. curiosity, allowing it, letting it roam freely wherever wings or paws may take it. sure, kids don't believe in much yet. but perhaps they believe in everything too. i have felt the wonder and openness of childhood again through this third grade class and i hope, in any way, you get a similar feeling from these poems.

there is this absurd notion of progress, this all-encompassing path, allotted prescribed steps to success, happiness. but surely, happiness is abstract and so is success. find out what they mean to you. and even if this zine seems 'confident', know i am not. it is from this starting point of nowhere and nothing that 'healing' can begin. let our weaknesses find each other in the dark.

'kids' by my sister erin



the kids of
walls
elementary



kent ohio
april 2009

B L U E

by sam

blue is my hamster's favorite color
and blue is a frozen frost.
blue is the glowing eyes of the death knight.
blue is the lizard's skin, the union color
of the sky, color in the sky,

and blue is a sea
swarming its waves,
thick jeans, the smell
after the rain.

it is a big kick,
the color of my carpet,
a scratch from a cat,
a color from blueberries,
the underwater color
of the sky.

W A S I

by sam

if i was a lizardman
i would live peacefully in the jungle.
when i was eight
i was an elf that could eat poison.

when i was six i was a robot
that took over the world.
do you remember when i was
the civil war general sherman?

and i was the dancing indians
of the shawnee honoring techsu
or the ufo flying over ohio
or the mystery of the crotan island,
and i would be the officer
john andrea and benedict arnold
going on a trip.

if i were a pirate
i would sail the seven seas,
if i was a crypt
i would have travelled earth.

when i was dead
i came back to life
and people ran from me.
i only told them
i wanted to be their friend.

M Y H E A R T *

by shawntel & cooper

whenever my heart is excited
i put her on my left shoulder.
sometimes when my heart is sad
she feels like a soggy wet sponge.
when my heart is happy she flies
up to the sky and plays with doves.

often when my heart is mad
it sounds like lions and tigers
and other wild animals fighting.

on mondays my heart cries
with all the work ahead of me.
sometimes my heart is nice,
sometimes not all the times
just sometimes.

my heart looks
as ugly as a zombie's face.
watch out ! my heart bites
like a shark about to eat a fish.
my heart feels like it's buried
in cement and can't get out.
my heart is a bottomless pit
that sucks up everything.

and my heart worries so much
i can't control it, yes,
i'm blaming it on him.

*track features
the vocal chords
of courtney plumley

F A I R I S

W H E E L

by niarra

it looks like a spider web.
the people riding are stuck to it

and if it fell it would be
a ride of a lifetime.

people came with bags
on their backs
and purses strapped
to their sides.

and it it fell it would be
a ride of a lifetime.

EXPERIMENT

by cooper

if i were an old man
i would yell at kids
to get off my lawn.

when i was a zombie
i ate almost everyone's flesh.

if i were an alien
i would invade earth
and experiment
on the humans.

last year
when i was a werewolf
i ate a bunch of cute bunnies.

if i was a chicken
i would throw
myself in a fire

if i were a bomb
i would blow up
the world.

SPINE

by niarra

my long
long spine
is like
a tree branch
my spine
is like a slinky
when i touch
my toes

my spine
is the staircase
and my brain
is the attic
where all
the cobwebs
are

thank you
for bending
down when i
want to do
a front roll

spine
you made
my side hurt
and make me
feel like
i'm old.

COLOR

-notes on sam's poem 'blue'

Colors exist vividly in our minds. They can stand for certain feelings, remind us of certain places, or recall certain people. I remember from one of my earliest childhood memories, this offensive orange color of the couch I would only know from the ages of three to five. The color brought back other sensory details and memories with it. Colors are complex too - they are never one solid color. Depending on what color they are next to or the amount of light and shadow, colors can change into seas of different tints and hues. As we grow, colors remain with us and connect objects of now with objects of the past. There is no set symbol for what blue is - each person has a different experience and response to it - Sam's 'Blue' proves this to me and also reveals careful attentiveness. How blue can be a 'big kick' and a 'scratch from a cat perplexes me as much as it strikes me as truth. These lines reveal a carefulness, a perspective on life that pays some intense attention to detail. Let us do the same.

THE HEART

-notes on cooper and shawntel's poem 'my heart'

We feel with our hearts, at least that is the long standing tradition. To personify our hearts is to assign the organ the job of emotion-handler. When we speak of our hearts, when we follow them, listen to them, or ignore them, it tells us something about how we feel. We brought in a screen print of a heart and asked the kids at Walls to tell us what it resembled besides a heart. We kept on with this idea that things are not only what they are supposed to be. We have our own subjectivity and no one definition or thought is the almighty truth. These heart poems come off as just what they should be: emotional canoe rides through ventricles and aortas. And we must not forget the heart is a pit stop for blood that might have gone rusty. Personifying our love organ makes us feel like the complicated beings we are, or in reverse, simplifies the job of love, deferring it to an organ in our chests. I like in this poem how Cooper and Shawntel personify their hearts differently in the same poem with the articles 'him' and 'her'. It breathes new life into this red thing that we want to bury our love into.

BODY & MIND

-notes on niarra's poems 'fairis wheel' and 'spine'

We carry them wherever we go. Our body parts are ours to worry about, to show off or drag around, to love or hate or feel indifferent towards. Funny bones, ankles, brains, feet, hang nails. The kids at Walls were pretty aware of how their body was part of them. We drew pictures of legs and arms and talked about how a leg was a baseball bat or how a mustache looked funny. The focus on metaphor in these poems is intense, like in the heart poems, because it is through our body parts that we perceive this world (at least partly). As we prepare for winter, for new seasons in this everything-whenever-it-wants Ohio climate, our body parts feel different, they grow, clothes seem to shrink, and we are forced to deal with relentless change. I think this shows in the kids poems.

Hiding inside the body is the mind. Where we process and analyze thoughts as perceived through senses, or just simply create them out of no where. The power of imagination (for example the destructiveness as in Niarra's poem about a ferris wheel falling) is one of the significant definers of human beings. If a world of rationality leads us to knowingly or unknowingly lose this imagination, let these poems remind us of all we are capable.

POSSIBILITY

-notes on sam's poem 'was i' and cooper's poem 'experiment'

We all wish to be what we are not sometimes. The earliest escapist tendencies arise when we imagine we are someone or something else. This is partly what the idea for this poem hinges on: that we can be something else, and we imagine how it would make us feel. If I want, I can be a snowflake in Antarctica landing between a King Penguin's eyes. That is, in part, what poetry is: transportation. All those things we are not supposed to or cannot be. But this poem idea is not purely escapist - it is also empathetic. We think of what living as another person, thing, place might be like and we try to get into that perspective. Those forgotten voices are the hardest to get in, but when we get there, we are all the better for it. These poems know they can never be something else, but that we can empathize and understand others as sentient human beings. There is also a certain murderousness to children, Cooper's 'bomb' and Sam's 'robot', but this murderousness is also a curiosity, a wonder towards how life might be different elsewhere, and what imagination could establish that to mean. It is empathy, it is possibility. Wonder on.

brains

he ran around the classroom with a
deflated red kickball on his head screaming:
'you can't take my brain, this is my brain.'

the teacher was more
than a little embarrassed
us kids were enjoying
his creative act.

they were grabbing at him
he was small and loud,
imagination
beyond their
allowances.

remember him:
correcting ms. nixon
on how to pronounce
'caribbean'
or naming all 42 presidents
in less than 20 seconds
to me in the lunch line
or us stretching out a curly fry
as the whole school gasped
in awe at its length.

i swore i was going to fight
if they took that brain.

instead i sat down quiet
with no voice
and an angry heart
as robert was sent
to the principal's office.

this is a poem i wrote a couple of years ago for
a fellow classmate of mine in second grade. we were told that robert had a 'few wires
disconnected' and to 'understand this is why he is different from everyone else'.

because of this i was initially frightened by his 'supposed difference' and did not talk to
him. i had heard people making fun of him, but robert was triumphant and i soon
developed a positive friendship with him in second grade. he is someone who inspired
me in some odd way, unlike any 'normal' person could.

proposing the question we know not how to answer

+knowing we all share and feel a common loss that seems to belong to existing as human beings in general, why do we introduce added pain and suffering to our lives? obviously the question is complex, situational. no simple answers but perhaps:
we know not what we do.

but we can start doing things to eliminate unnecessary oppression. i am not suggesting some cure-all for pain and suffering. all i am saying is pay attention. for real.

+understanding. empathy. critical thinking. of course, the alienated are able to rise up and become stronger individuals than they were supposed, but why this continual division of winners and losers? competition need not leave the loser on the ground with winners in a circle laughing at his/her loss. there can be no hierarchy to ourselves. yes, love adventure excitement can still exist without othering and degrading each other. in fact, it might feel even better. but no, we are not hedonists, please.

of where i might have learned tenderness

i am sitting on a map-carpet of the united states and a girl named allison is reading a story to our first grade class. i am wearing huge glasses that cover most of my face. sitting indian style next to a book shelf i learn how to listen. her hair is angel blonde, almost water-gold. as she reads about a family of bears. little bumps, mountains of empathy, appear on my arms. i feel alive - quietly, furtively. she turns the pages like bird feathers, delicately letting us see the pictures, folding the book out to us like thrusting out a chest. i feel everywhere at once. inside the story, inside my classmates. and she closes it slowly and breaths out of her nose. 'that's it. my favorite book.' our tiny hands make sounds like paw-prints in mud. i sit against the book shelf unfold my legs and breathe out everyone in the room. the bumps disappear. and i eat a pb & j.

DOWNLOAD THE KIDS ALBUM FOR FREE HERE:

<http://www.archive.org/details/KidsPoemsFromWallsElementary>

+ CONTACT +

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<http://www.wolfpile.tumblr.com>

<http://www.simperingfool.blogspot.com>

hey !

please share this zine alike

pass it on, write your own

make things happen people

e-mail me for current address

and/or more information

happenings, thoughts,

shows, readings,

anything at all, really.

A collage artwork featuring a central anatomical diagram of a human heart with labels like 'Aorta', 'Ventricles', and 'Valves'. The heart is surrounded by torn pieces of paper, including a 'VISITOR' pass with handwritten names 'Richard Wachter' and 'Andy Peel', and a 'Hymns and Songs' book cover. The background is a dense grid of small, identical portraits of a man in a suit.

(of the myths we made up for each other)

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